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ABSTRACT

This "Fastback" focuses on avoiding boredom in schools. Following an introduction that explains the importance of teachers breathing life into subject matter, the booklet includes five sections. Section one, "The Nature of Boredom," defines boredom and explains that both teachers and students are responsible for beating boredom. Section two, "Creating Interest," notes that a challenge for many teachers is making classwork meaningful beyond the routine. Several ways to break out of old routines are suggested: putting new twists on old themes; balancing freedom and structure; providing enough structure for young children; and holding students' attention by designing for high interaction, designing for easy comprehension, using a lively voice, maximizing variety, designing for momentum, and watching for signs of boredom. Section three, "The Importance of Rapport," suggests that teachers who want to command attention and interest must learn to deal with competing events; they must be unafraid to be imperfect, avoid being drawn in by disruption, and address students' criticism. Section four, "Dealing with Fatigue," notes that boredom can be the product of fatigue and vice versa, but that rest is not always the best antidote. Section five, "Designing Games That Build Interest," explains that academic games are very appropriate for building interest and skills in the classroom. Effective educational games provide momentum, participation, reachable goals, and immediate feedback. (Contains 13 references.) (SM)

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FASTBACK

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Beating Boredom, Creating Interest

M. Thomas Russell

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28

PHI DELTA KAPPA EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

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Beating Boredom, Creating Interest

by
M. Thomas Russell

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Table of Contents

Introduction 7

The Nature of Boredom 10

Creating Interest 13

New Twists on Old Themes 16

Balancing Freedom and Structure 18

Structure and Young Children 22

Holding Students' Attention 25

The Importance of Rapport 30

Dealing with Fatigue 33

Designing Games that Build Interest 37

Asking and Answering Questions 40

Conclusion 43

Resources 45

Introduction

Anyone can get bored. It happens to people of every age, background, income, and education; people who work hard, people who are dependable, people who are highly skilled. And, of course, students can and do get bored in school — and that can be a problem.

However, we often avoid using the term *boredom*. A supervisor in a nuclear power plant once told me that all of his workers regularly experience boredom, but they, too, avoided using the word *boredom*. The word just is not socially acceptable, he said. "There's a ban on *boredom*." But the feeling of boredom is nonetheless real.

A flight instructor once recounted his airline experiences to me. He would fly to exotic places around the world, stay in elegant hotels, eat at good restaurants, and earn good money while doing it. One summer he made eight trips to Paris. "People think, 'Ah . . . Paris'," he said, "but it's not so great. You fly over 'the pond' and land at the same airport and go to the same restaurant and the same hotel that you've been to seven other times in the same summer. It gets old." Even the exotic can become commonplace and, well, boring.

I also asked several pilots-in-training if they ever had been bored while "flying" a large-craft simulator. One answered, "Once you're at cruise altitude it's boring. All you're doing is sitting there. I mean, every so often you monitor the instruments, look around, see if anything's out of the normal. . . . We cruised one time for about half an hour. That was pretty boring."

Both new and experienced pilots discuss the darker side of their so-called exotic work, using words such as *blah, stagnant, burn-out, humdrum, monotonous, ho hum, routine, rut, dismal, doldrums, drag, flat,* and *tedium.* These are the same words that students often use to describe their school experiences.

I appreciate the comments of professionals such as the power plant supervisor and the flight instructor because they point up the fact that boredom is real; it affects even highly trained and highly disciplined adults. And boredom can lead to serious problems. It is implicated in alcoholism, divorce, and negative work-related problems that range from increased instances of defective workmanship to a greater risk of mid-air collisions or a nuclear meltdown. For students, boredom can lead to truancy, fighting, vandalism, and general apathy. And even the best students can get bored.

Although dedicated, hard-working students can plow through a good deal of boring activity, that does not justify curriculum or instruction that neglects to evoke interest and combat boredom. We all know teachers who pride themselves on working their students hard, teachers who say, "It's not easy to get an A from me." But perhaps a better source of pride might be the *qual-*

ity, not the *quantity*, of the workload; and that quality might be judged in part by the enjoyment that students experience during learning.

There is no virtue in creating humdrum or difficult lessons that bore students. An effective teacher breathes life into subject matter by examining what creates and sustains student interest. With this philosophy in mind, this fastback examines boredom — and interest — as vital signs of learning and offers suggestions for beating boredom and creating interest in school.

9

The Nature of Boredom

Borrrring!" is the rallying cry of the disaffected student. (And I've also heard it more than once in the teacher's lounge.) In a generic sense *boredom* can be defined as "weariness" or "restlessness" brought on by a lack of physical, emotional, or mental stimulation. Any good dictionary can add some other terms to the boredom family, for example:

Ennui: "A feeling of weariness and dissatisfaction"
and
Anomie: "Personal unrest, alienation, and uncertainty that comes from a lack of purpose or ideals."

Many teachers view boredom as the student's problem. They may see certain students as generally uninterested in learning or unwilling to put forward enough effort to discover interesting aspects of a subject.

The only conversation about the problem of boredom that I've ever witnessed among professional educators also was the shortest. A principal opened the topic during a morning faculty meeting. It was the last item on the agenda. With a facial expression of distress and great

caution, he presented his thoughts phrase by phrase until, in the end, he had said, basically, "About every week, I have one or two students in my office who tell me how boring school is. I'd like to throw this out to you faculty now and get some ideas about what we might be able to do about it." My secret respect for the principal was his only reward that morning. In short order, the topic was tabled indefinitely. Student boredom was not, the teachers made clear, *their* responsibility. It was up to students to get interested.

One reason that teachers bristle when students (or principals) talk about the need for making teaching more interesting is that this kind of talk often is interpreted as laying blame. After all, no one wants to accept responsibility for being a boring teacher, even if that conclusion is inescapable. Many teachers also view boredom as a failure of students' self-discipline. They say, "If students are bored, it's their own fault. The subject is interesting; they're just not interested in it."

But, in fact, beating boredom is the responsibility of both students and teachers. Yes, student attitudes play an important role. Boredom can be a pose. In some schools, peer pressure to be "bored by school" is the norm. However, teachers also bear responsibility to examine what and how they teach to ensure that students' interests, aptitudes, and prior knowledge are tapped to encourage interest both in subject matter and, hopefully, in the act of learning itself.

It is trite to say that "learning can be fun," but almost every teacher would agree that one byproduct of learning should be enjoyment — and a hunger for more

learning. Teachers are in the best position to create a learning environment that will help make "productive enjoyment" the norm. Does this mean that teachers need to become entertainers? Certainly not. But it does mean that teachers need to attend to the cultivation of interest.

A classroom that is viewed as boring will not generate as much student learning as one that is viewed as interesting. Note that I do not say "fun" in this context, because classrooms that students view as fun sometimes are as unproductive as classrooms that students see as boring. Essential will be the right balance of rigor and distraction, seriousness and humor. The important point is that interest can be created without losing focus on learning. Indeed, real learning is best accomplished by creating real interest.

12

Creating Interest

Rather than tabling the discussion of boredom, the faculty might have brainstormed some ways that boredom can be displaced by creating interest. One subject worthy of discussion is good habits and routines.

Most teachers (and parents) seek to instill good habits in young people, often as productive routines — actions that students perform automatically. Good habits and routines, once instilled, free students to get on with more important tasks. For example, first-graders are taught to write their names on their school papers. This is a major focus, particularly at an age when correctly forming letters and remembering how to spell one's name can still be challenging. But, in time, putting one's name on a school paper becomes routine. And so, in third grade let's say, teachers no longer should need to remind students to do this basic act. Instead, they can concentrate more instructional time on other matters.

Good habits and routines have a natural attraction. In fact, the beckoning of habit is nicely illustrated in Kenneth Grahame's classic story, *The Wind in the Willows*, in which Rat takes Mole on a trip that leads to many ad-

ventures in a new land. After a time, Rat and Mole trek through the Wild Wood, a forbidding forest that shakes the nerves of every decent animal. In this unfamiliar territory, weary Mole suddenly is energized by a signal that touches him like an electric shock. It is strong and heard only by him:

> It was one of these mysterious fairy calls from out the void that suddenly reaches Mole in the darkness, making him tingle through and through with its very familiar appeal, even while as yet he could not clearly remember what it was.

Mole begins sniffing about and eventually is pleasantly overwhelmed by the clearest recollection:

> Home! That was what they meant, those caressing appeals, those soft touches wafted through the air, those invisible little hands pulling and tugging, all one way! . . . The call was clear, the summons was plain. He must obey it instantly, and go.

People are much like Mole. We gravitate toward the familiar, and it does not take long for our routines to become a kind of "home." Habits and routines are like a security blanket. Thus students who develop good habits have a helpful base on which to build more advanced learning. Teachers often can quickly spot students who are likely to have difficulty with subject matter; those are the students who are still having trouble mastering basic good habits and routines, such as putting their name on every paper, raising their hand before speaking during a class discussion, bringing their materials to class, and getting to the classroom on time.

However, habits and routines also can have a dark side. I once met a high school teacher who was so uncomfortable with any class disruption that he established a policy: If any student talked out of turn three times during a semester, a parent-teacher conference would be held. This extraordinary policy represents a fear of the unanticipated, which I suspect indicates a fear of risk and a too-dear love of routine and authority.

Good habits and routines form a comfort zone for both teachers and students, and in effective classrooms as much work as possible is done within those zones. But taking risks also can help to widen the comfort zones. As in the previous example, one productive risk may be to permit students to have a freer range of conversation and discussion at times. Teachers risk "chaos," but often out of such chaos comes learning. Students learn about conversation management, such as taking turns, using inclusive language, acknowledging the ideas of others, and so on.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for many teachers is to make classwork meaningful beyond the routine. Most curricula feature a wealth of potential assignments. Realistically there always will be too much to read, too many questions to ask and to answer, too many worksheets. It is easy to "routinize" the curriculum: Read X number of pages, answer X number of questions, do X number of worksheets. Day in and day out, this routine can become deadly to learning. And yet many teachers feel guilty if they do not make use of all the materials they have on hand, even though they know very well that there is no way to use them all. When the routine

takes over and squeezes out the unexpected, the interesting, the fun, then it can become unproductive. When teachers push themselves and their students through more material than seems possible, they sacrifice interaction and enjoyment. But the greatest sacrifice can be meaning itself.

Also, it can be too easy for some actions to become routine. I once taped an important note at eye level in the middle of my bathroom mirror so that I couldn't miss it the next time I shaved. The next morning, instead of reading the note, I impatiently moved it to the side and shaved. Then I put the note back where it had been. I repeated this silly routine for several weeks until at last I tired of moving the "important" note out of my way. Only then did I actually read the note and do what it said.

The moral of this little story is: Be mindful of routine. It takes root quickly and obscures meaning unless it is regularly modified. Beating boredom and creating interest require mindful, rather than mindless, responses. True intelligence has been defined as the ability to suppress instinct and choose a better alternative. No intelligence is involved in a purely automatic response.

New Twists on Old Themes

One way to break out of unproductive routines and habits is to put a new twist on an old theme. Many teachers already do this — dare I say it? — as a matter of routine. For example, learning numbers in a foreign language is a necessity, but memorizing the foreign

words can be tedious. Some amount of monotony is inevitable in academic work; but with a little thought, most teachers can find an interesting instructional technique even if the content itself is not particularly invigorating. One way I livened up the number-learning activity was to divide my foreign language students into three-person teams, two teams at a time "performing" on any given day. The numbers game went like this:

As I called out multiple-digit numbers in Spanish, students on the teams had to sort through a set of 10 large cards of individual digits and then display the number by arranging themselves in proper sequence so that the rest of the class could read the number. This required the students to shuffle themselves around in rapid, comical fashion. If I called out 2,082, for example, the student holding the 2 card would have to appear at the beginning of the sequence and then run around his or her teammates to appear at the end. If I called out 282, the first student in the sequence would have to pass the 2 card to the third student. And so on. However, if the third student was still sorting through the stack of cards for a 2, the game turned out to be an exercise in frustration that was hilarious to watch. In this manner, my students learned their numbers rapidly. The "chaos" was short-lived and highly productive. And the game raised interest all around. As one girl on a winning team said of her opponents, "We're winning, but they sound like they're having more fun."

This is not to say that every lesson must be turned into a game. Much skill building depends on repetition, and repetition can be monotonous. Students need some

experience with monotony in order to build the intellectual and emotional stamina that is required to progress from one stage of competence to a higher stage. Think of musicians endlessly practicing scales. But, of course, along with the scales come melodies, small at first and then, later, more complicated and more pleasing to the ear. Some of the most fruitful periods of learning happen in the midst of monotony, as practice begins to pay off by making sense or turning into skill. Therefore, periodic spates of monotony in the classroom are not an enemy of an interesting learning environment. They become so if they are the *only* things that happen. Thus teachers should regularly assess the effectiveness of their methods and materials, looking for balance in building interest and beating boredom.

Balancing Freedom and Structure

When boredom is not an issue of staying alert, then it may be a power struggle. Teachers who enforce monotony — who build boredom in the name of rigor — also risk fostering unproductive coping behaviors. Unproductive coping behaviors in boring environments are well documented in both education and industry and often are creative, nonverbal statements about a perceived loss of control over one's life or an inability to justify one's time and effort.

Charlton and Hertz (1989) talk about security guards charged with protecting a nuclear weapons area, which required them to watch fences and empty ground for hours on end. Many guards, faced with this boring task,

resorted to creative coping strategies. Some admitted to secretly playing baseball with a broomstick and milk cartons; others coped by gradually destroying the interior of their patrol truck by picking pieces off the dashboard and cutting up the seats. This unproductive (destructive) coping is mirrored in the classroom by the student who slowly destroys a textbook or notebook, vandalizes a desk or chair, doodles incessantly, or otherwise occupies his or her time in an effort to avoid the boredom of doing monotonous, apparently meaningless school work.

Students can do only so much to avoid engaging in unproductive coping. So it is up to teachers to structure and balance lessons so that unproductive coping is unnecessary. One way to do so is to involve students in planning lessons or in reshaping them midstream. It is a good thing when the one who holds the reins believes in sharing them so that instruction can be as meaningful as possible.

Let me illustrate this point as follows. Teachers can candy-coat workbook exercises only so many times before students say, "Oh no, not the workbook again!" Necessary repetition — skill and drill — can retain value only if teachers protect such exercises from excessive familiarity. Students do need the security of structure, or routine, such as workbook exercises. They need to possess certain skills and knowledge in order to tackle new learning successfully. After all, frustration can be as detrimental to learning as boredom. And students will not take learning "risks" — that is, tackle new ideas and projects boldly — without the security that such struc-

ture provides. But the complement to structure is "freedom," opportunities to engage in those new ideas and new projects worth being boldly undertaken. Interest thrives best when there is a balance between freedom and structure.

Lack of structure can leave a feeling of being out of control, which can lead to confusion, frustration, and boredom. A friend of mine who is a chess expert tells me that one maxim of good chess is, "Move in such a way as to leave the opponent confused about a saving move. It doesn't do any good to box the opponent in with only one possible way out." According to my friend, inferior players become impatient (and bored) in situations that appear very open-ended and so make self-destructive moves. The reason? Their knowledge base is smaller than their opponents' and they are unable to see the underlying structure of the game.

Like the superior chess player, some students are able to extract structure from activities that appear unstructured to others. Ability and knowledge influence their ability to do this. Once they have detected the structure, they are more able to put it to use in understanding the activity. When structure is missing, students tend to wander through an activity, not knowing what to do. Their attention is not sustained and their interest will be limited.

While living in Cincinnati some years ago, my wife and I became friends with another couple in our apartment complex. This couple had an eight-year-old son named Pat, who occasionally stopped by our apartment to play our Atari video game. He would play for 45 min-

utes undistracted and highly interested. One day his parents told Pat that we had just bought a "Space Invaders" cartridge. Pat rounded up a friend and paid us another visit. "Can we play your 'Space Invaders'?" he asked. The question was only a formality. I could tell from Pat's and his friend's eyes and the forward tilt of their bodies that the boys were waiting only for me to get out of the way so that they could run into the living room and take their positions in front of the television, man the video controls, and begin destroying space aliens. When the boys discovered that there were no less than 128 options on the "Space Invaders" cartridge, they began sampling every one of them. I interrupted to tell them that if they would stay on a certain beginning-level option made for two players, they could learn the game better and enjoy themselves more. The boys were not persuaded. Rambling through one option after another, they became completely disinterested in the game after only ten minutes!

Pat's behavior illustrates the problem of too many options and too little structure. Had there been only a few options, the boys' interest probably would have endured. Pat never returned to play "Space Invaders" or any of the other games that, up to that point, he had loved to play. The extraordinary array of choices overwhelmed him, and the negative feeling attached to the experience seemed to push him away from further involvement with the games.

The same kind of situation arises in class. During my third year of teaching, I tried repeatedly to give my high school students freedom to choose. I encouraged them

to decide what learning activities we should use and how we should use them. The problem was that my students did not have enough knowledge to make good choices in these matters. My urging them to make choices only frustrated them. One girl drove the point home to me one day by saying, "Mr. Russell, just tell us what you want us to do, and we'll do it."

From that moment on, I understood that freedom was frustrating in the absence of structure. Only by taking the time to design effective materials and methods could I provide an acceptable array of choices. These would include materials that were as *obviously* relevant as possible to the students, and methods that clearly increased students' desire to become involved. Once the relevance of the subject matter and the effectiveness of the methods were established, I could be certain that the students' freedom to choose would actually enhance their learning.

Structure and Young Children

Young children are capable of more than we usually give them credit for, but they can flounder at even simple tasks without proper help. Take children's crafts, for example. Many adults are dismayed when they try to lead a young child through the intricate steps of some craft projects. But the intricacy can be "controlled" even when it cannot be simplified. Much of this control consists of planning and preparation, which good teachers already know. For example, a seven-year-old might have difficulty cutting neat strips of paper for a paper sculp-

ture but can do quite well when it comes to curling those strips. The "solution" to this potential problem is simple: The teacher (or a classroom aide) can cut the strips in advance.

Likewise, students at this age may not be adept at applying liquid glue to put together the pieces of their paper sculptures. Solution: Dispense the glue in small containers, such as jar lids, and allow the students to dab on the glue using toothpicks.

This is balancing of structure and assistance with freedom for young children. Another example is guiding a child — let's say a first- or second-grader — through a fairly complex drawing. Children at this age usually will not do well at positioning the drawing on a piece of paper or drawing in what most adults consider the "right" proportions. Solution: If the child is guided to fold the paper twice so that it has four equal quadrants (a surprisingly difficult task for this age, by the way) and then asked to copy on a piece of paper a master drawing that is put in four corresponding quadrants on the chalkboard, the child can make a remarkably accurate reproduction. This project is not very original, but the technique is akin to one often used in art classes. In that technique, dating from at least the Renaissance, half-inch squares are marked across the entire drawing surface so that student artists concentrate on only one small part of the drawing at a time.

This drawing exercise exemplifies the notion of balance, because it involves breaking a large task into smaller activities. Some of these activities are best undertaken by the teacher so that other activities can be accomplished by stu-

dents. The planning and preparation are forms of structure that, in turn, allow for students to exercise freedom in using and developing their skills and talents successfully.

Following is a final example involving a somewhat older group. Several years ago I failed to use the approach I have just described with a class of seventh-graders. I reaped the consequences of this failure. This eager group wanted to help put up one of those 12-foot-long bulletin boards, an assignment that most teachers consider a result of bad karma. The chore involved tearing off large strips of paper from 48-inch-wide rolls and making a black base covering the bulletin board, then tearing off other colors of paper, cutting them into smaller pieces, positioning them on the board, and stapling them to it. The goal was for the whole surface to be decoratively covered.

The students started out excitedly, but it soon became apparent that the chore was far too unstructured. They had trouble tearing the strips off the rolls and positioning them on the board; they were overwhelmed by decisions about coordinating the colors; and they repeatedly stapled incorrectly. My anxiety level — and the students' — rose as the ordeal unfolded. My frustration became apparent in my tone of voice and the numerous orders I issued. Nobody had a very good time.

Later on, a fellow teacher said it was the best bulletin board she had ever seen. But my seventh-graders took another view. Referring to the construction process, one student spoke for the class: "Oh, it was awful!"

An experience like this might move a teacher to decide against ever involving students in such a project again. (And students might never want to be involved again.)

But that would be unfortunate. It is much more sensible to size up a project, make the necessary adjustments to give students both the structure they need and the freedom they crave, and go forward. Creating interesting, interactive environments for 20, 30, or more students can be difficult, but that is no reason not to proceed.

Holding Students' Attention

Designing for attention is critical to creating interest. Students' attention naturally will wander when school lessons are monotonous, unpleasant, or boring. If teachers can hold students' attention, then fewer students will slip mentally away or act out, and real interest — and learning — can be created.

Teachers often say that their students seem to have an attention span of only a few minutes. They expect their students' interest span to be short as well. Actually, except in the case of students with specific psychological or physiological problems, it makes little sense to speak of attention span, because duration of attention is not a fixed commodity. Teachers can influence how long their students' will attend to a lesson by the topics and materials they choose and by how they structure time and activities. Following are the basic principles.

Design for High Interaction. Students should be *involved* in the activity. They should be thinking, responding verbally, and be physically engaged in the lesson. Most lessons should involve what I call "missing pieces" that must be supplied by students. This goes beyond having students fill in blanks as a lesson goes along. It means

that students must actively listen, think, and discover information. Sometimes this takes time, and the teacher must resist the urge to "speed up" simply in order to cover material. Such speeding up usually involves the teacher taking over and supplying too much information, which kills student interaction.

Design for Easy Comprehension. Students are most engaged by lessons that have concrete, tangible elements that are easier to comprehend than abstractions. If abstract concepts need to be taught, the best way to approach them is through the concrete. This means that lessons should be supported by materials that tap the senses: visual aids such as maps and charts, auditory aids such as audiotapes, tactile aids such as math manipulatives, and so on. For example, if I did not have an overhead projector and planned to teach a lesson on the Balkans, I would want to be sure at least to use a large map and to leave an arrow or other marker on the Balkan region to make it easy for students to locate that region during the lesson. I would also want to use slides or pictures or videos to help put students mentally in the Balkans to create interest and link learning to sensory memories.

Use a Lively Voice. Hilaire Belloc, in "A Guide to Boring," said that "any subject can be made boring; but the method is all-important. And the first rule I would give in this matter is to speak in a sing-song, or at any rate with continuous repeated rhythm and accent" (1931, pp. 19-20). Teachers need to keep this contrary advice in mind and be certain to use vocal patterns that convey enthusiasm and create interest. I once had an instructor

for a class in advertising who spoke so drearily that most of my classmates and I spent our class time just trying to stay awake. By the end of the class I was convinced that I deserved an A simply for not snoring too loudly. It is easy to fall into the bad habit of using a monotonous voice. If the teacher is not enthusiastic, then the students will not be enthusiastic. And so wise teachers will speak in ways that they, too, find interesting and engaging.

Maximize Variety. Both students and teachers need variety not only in lesson topics but also in how lessons are structured and the activities that are chosen. Students often will provide hints about activities they want, and sometimes they will come right out and say what they need. In my second year of teaching, a student interjected a sincere comment into the lesson one day. "This class needs some spice," she said. She took quite a risk to say that; but I admired her spunk, and so I said, "Okay, let's talk about it." As a result, the entire class benefited from my rethinking of how the lesson might be structured for more variety and involvement.

Following that school year I began full-time graduate work for a year, and I was determined to learn how to build interesting learning climates. When I finally returned to teaching, I thought I had the technique down pat. But to my horror, one day a student leaned forward on her desk, covered her face with both hands, and moaned, "Oh, this is boring!" How could my efforts to design interesting lessons have failed? The answer, as it turned out, was rather simple: Anything can grow old. I had designed many interesting activities, but the ac-

tivities themselves were too much alike. What I needed was more variety among the activities. Some activities needed to be quiet, others needed to be boisterous; some needed to be thought-provoking, others needed to be physically challenging. Like balancing structure and freedom, balancing the kinds of activities that engage students is essential.

Design for Momentum. Brissett and Snow (1993) say that boredom is the absence of momentum. Bertrand Russell (1930) called it the inability to tell one day from another. In creating interest, students need to move from one moment to the next, from one lesson or activity to the next, anticipating variety and difference. One way to create momentum that is useful in working with students of all ages is to set short, but reasonable, deadlines for projects and papers. Breaking a long lesson into more manageable pieces, varying how those pieces are taught and learned, and setting intermediate points of closure (deadlines) help to "move the lesson along." That is what designing for momentum means.

A three-minute start-up activity can set a class in positive motion for learning from the first moments in the classroom. Announcing that a discussion period will last 15 minutes will help focus students' comments. An end-of-period deadline can help students finish productively, rather than postponing a lesson and having to complete it as homework.

Watch for Signs of Boredom. Hilaire Belloc gives three signs, all too familiar to the teacher, that tell whether we are "successfully" boring someone:

- Students are bored if their eyes stray from the activity to a trivial focal point, such as a bird outside the window or a passing cloud.
- Students are bored if they make comments that bear no relation to the topic at hand.
- Students are bored if conversing with their classmates is more important than attending to the lesson or activity.

When these signs appear, it is time to rethink the instructional strategy and adjust the lesson accordingly.

Teachers will be most successful in holding students' attention if they design lessons that promote high levels of student interaction; break information into concrete, easy-to-comprehend pieces; use a lively, enthusiastic voice in addressing students; maximize variety in terms of lesson content and activities; build momentum so that students move eagerly from one learning situation to the next; and watch for signs of boredom.

29

The Importance of Rapport

The teacher who wants to command attention and interest must learn to deal with competing events. Often those competing events are introduced by disruptive students whom the teacher has failed to interest. If the disruptive student "steals the show," other students are drawn away, too. There are three ways that teachers can guard against being sidetracked by disruption.

1. Don't be afraid to be imperfect. Perfection is not an option in any case, and so it is in the teacher's best interest to admit to imperfection. The point — for students as well as teachers — is to strive to learn and improve. Everyone falls short some time or other.

2. Don't be drawn in by a disruption. Potential troublemakers will soon learn whether a teacher can be drawn into their drama or not. Most teachers are wise to avoid impulsive responses or reactions whenever possible. Most disruptions are transitory if attended to promptly and calmly. A follow-up conference then can deal with the disruption in greater depth.

3. Don't avoid students' criticism. Teachers need to let students air their gripes from time to time. But griping may be a sign of boredom, too. If a lesson is not connecting with students' needs and interests, initiating a gripe session may be a way to liven up the class period. One way to combat this problem is to allow the gripe session but contain it. Let students have their say and then move on. In this way, that negative energy can be vented and rechanneled toward a productive outcome.

Building rapport with students often is an intuitive process that follows on these three notions. For example, sometimes a simple, direct statement can forestall a more serious disruption. During the first few days of a class one fall, two sophomore boys sat next to each other. They exhibited all the signs of semester-long troublemakers. They were inattentive, talking back and forth instead of listening to the lesson or participating in the discussion. As they settled into one of their self-entertaining sessions one morning, I stopped talking to the class and turned to them. "Would you guys mind not causing any trouble? I want to keep things going smoothly in here," I said. Then I turned back to the lesson.

At that moment, at that time of the year, those boys were not expecting the kind of attention I gave them. I did not raise my voice; I did not scold. I simply and directly asked them not to make trouble. No reprimand was necessary — or given — and nothing more needed to be said. They became cooperative, good students for me. They became allies in creating interest by taking an energetic part in class activities.

31

Of course, not all students can be won over so easily; but few students require much more attention to start them down a constructive path. With time and patience, teachers who approach the notion of building student rapport with good intention, good humor, honesty, and directness can achieve that end.

One final note about building rapport: Teachers need to find ways to incorporate students' wit into the learning climate. Our wittiest students are often impulsive, highly interesting, and intelligent individuals — who can get themselves into trouble by reducing an entire class to irrepressible laughter. As often as not, they also catch their teachers off guard. Teachers can view such behavior as disruptive and abrasive, or they can help students shape their wit appropriately. A good laugh at the right moment does not destroy interest; indeed, it does just the opposite. When "clowning" becomes a problem, then a quiet conversation may be in order. But squelching all humor will be counterproductive. Teachers will win their share of witty young scholars over, add delight to the learning climate, and build rapport by accepting, even prizing, the witty personality.

Dealing with Fatigue

Boredom often is the product of fatigue — and sometimes vice versa. At the age of three, my son might enter the kitchen with undiminished energy after playing in his sandbox for two hours. However, if I then said that he should pick up the toys in his room, he would immediately fall to the floor, crying, "I'm too tired."

Sometimes the question is, How much is too much? A joke is told about a farmer who hired a man to bale hay. After the hired hand had tossed bales for three hours, the farmer asked him to clear fence posts. This taxing job, too, was no problem to the hired hand. Several hours later, the posts having been cleared, the farmer took the man down into the farmhouse basement and asked him to sort potatoes. The job required only that different size potatoes be put into different bins. The farmer returned after two hours to find the man flat on his back, exhausted.

"What's the matter?" asked the farmer.

The worker murmured, "I didn't mind baling the hay and clearing all those fence posts, but sorting these potatoes is gonna kill me."

Students are much like the hired man. We ask them in class after class to be active, enthusiastic, and interested. Most students cannot sustain these attitudes for the entire day every day. Fatigue is a real problem even for hard workers. However, being tired does not necessarily equate to being unable to work or think.

Three types of fatigue are common at school. *Physical fatigue* comes from lack of sufficient sleep, hard or sustained physical labor (including athletics), and extended study postures (such as sitting for long periods). *Mental fatigue* comes from studying, thinking, worrying, or the exercise of the emotions. Finally, *psychosomatic fatigue* comes as a result of anticipating boredom. Each of these types of fatigue can arise during a class and can be handled without serious disruption to a lesson. The key is to replace fatigue with interest and activity.

Two of my children recently accompanied me to a university library, where I needed to look at several publications in a storage room. While I waited for the books and journals to be located by the librarian, my 10-year-old daughter gave strong signs of psychosomatic fatigue. She broke into a familiar mantra: "Boy, Daddy, I am so tired." I told her that I would look over the publications as quickly as possible and that she was free to lie down on a couple of chairs that could be pulled together. With all the drama a 10-year-old can muster, she struggled to support herself on the oaken table, unable to muster the strength to pull the chairs together and lie down.

At that point, I mentioned to my son that he could get *Peanuts* comic books in the storage center if he cared to

34

request them. When a clerk brought a stack for him, my daughter immediately revived and, along with her brother, began to read so voraciously that when I had finished my own business, I repeatedly had to tell them it was time to close the books and leave.

Finding something interesting to do in the absence of a specific plan is one way to combat boredom. But often lesson content cannot be altered or replaced. In this case, if students anticipate that a lesson's content will not be interesting and begin to exhibit signs of psychosomatic fatigue, then a teacher can stimulate activity by reordering the content, approaching it in a different manner, or breaking the whole into more manageable pieces, such as by listing lesson subgoals. These subgoals can be written on the chalkboard and checked off as each is accomplished. This simple activity can create momentum and thereby alleviate boredom.

When students are bothered by physical or mental fatigue — as opposed to psychosomatic fatigue — a teacher can help students develop their own momentum in a couple of ways. One way is to assign longer tasks for individual students to work on at their own pace. Another way is by giving choices. For example, a teacher might ask, "Would you like to go ahead with our lesson and then get your homework assignment after that, or would you like to get started on your homework now?" I have been surprised from time to time when a very tired class chose to go forward with the lesson and then take the homework home. Thus posing a choice can be a more effective approach than "guessing" what students might want to do.

35

Rest is not always the best antidote for weariness. A good runner does not collapse on the grass after a run. Instead, the runner changes activity, perhaps spending several minutes stretching before running again. Even students who collapse on their desks during the final hour of the school day demonstrate "supernatural" strength when the final bell rings, as they bolt out the classroom door and race to the school bus or put in an hour and a half in after-school athletics. Varying class activities can break up fatigue so that when it occurs, it is a minor and transient distraction. One of the finest compliments that students can pay to a teacher is to say, "Time sure goes by fast in this class." That is more likely to happen when teachers attend to signs of physical, mental, and psychosomatic fatigue and alter lessons and activities accordingly.

Designing Games that Build Interest

Academic games are as appropriate for building interest and skills in the classroom as physical games are for building interest and skills on the athletic field. Games can be either competitive or noncompetitive, and I do not plan to discuss the pros and cons of either form. Opinions are divided. My point is that games offer alternative ways of learning that can tap students' natural learning styles and preferences, sometimes more effectively than standard lesson delivery.

Students find it hard to be bored during a good game. A good educational game is fun but is structured to avoid unduly high emotional arousal that can interfere with learning. An effective educational game has all the necessary components for both creating interest and building sound learning. An effective game features 1) momentum, 2) participation, 3) a reachable goal, and 4) immediate feedback.

Momentum. Students expect games to be faster paced than regular classroom activities. Game events should

occur in quick succession, even though they may feature quiet phases of brainstorming or silent thinking. One way to ensure good momentum is to have clear rules. Often, students need to practice the game to get the rules straight. The simpler the rules are, the better.

I once developed a version of the popular game, *Battleship*, for foreign language learning. My version required students to call out coordinates from their handouts before throwing a ball at targets on the chalkboard. At first, the soft rubber ball I supplied bounced and rolled everywhere after each throw, and the students and I spent half our time chasing it. That cost us game momentum, and both learning and interest waned. When I rethought the game, I came up with an alternative to the rubber ball: socks. By rolling several clean gym socks together, I had a ball that would hit quietly against the chalkboard and would drop with a gentle thud. This small adjustment resulted in a game that became extremely popular and worked well to sustain momentum and encourage active learning.

Participation. Good educational games involve all of the students in the classroom. Active learning is not a spectator sport. Classroom games allow two types of player involvement. The first is intellectual, the second procedural; both are important.

High-ability students can dominate games in which quick verbal responses are required. Thus teachers must look for ways to keep the lightning-fast responders from blurting out answers before others have a chance. One way is to make a rule that no one can give a right an-

swer more than X number of times in a row. This type of rule encourages teamwork, as quick responders allow their slower classmates to contribute for the good of the team.

The same strategy can work for physical aspects of the game. For example, in my sockball version of *Battleship*, some high-ability students could not throw the ball accurately, but some lower-ability students could. A rule we made was that no matter who gave a correct answer on a team, all teammates would take turns "firing" at enemy ships. In this way, students who tended to be the last to register an answer were very often essential to a team's victory.

A Reachable Goal. Interest hangs on the balance of challenge and ability, and so educational games must be designed to ensure that students experience success, regardless of their skill level. A reachable goal helps make such balance more likely.

I will illustrate this point with a language baseball game. I developed this game to encourage a quick review of a rather extensive body of material. The action began when I posed a question to two teams. The first person on either of teams to call out a correct answer earned a chance to throw a nonbouncing ball at targets on the chalkboard. When I began the game, my students went at it with everything they had. But then they lost steam as the game went on. I discovered that the physical aspect of the game was too difficult — in other words, the goal was not within reach. The problem was simply that the targets on the chalkboard were drawn

39

too small, and that the difference between girls' and boys' accuracy was dramatic. By enlarging the targets, I was able to shrink that difference; and, in fact, all of the students in seats farther from the board became more successful. Balance between challenge and ability was restored.

Immediate Feedback. There is a clear connection between providing immediate feedback and retaining game momentum. When students do not know how well they are doing in a game, interest diminishes. Imagine what it would be like if football players had to wait several minutes after each play to find out whether the referees were going to give them credit for yardage gains. In an educational game, the students need to know "the score" immediately after the play, both to sustain — and stimulate — interest and to keep the momentum high.

Instructional games of all sorts can be used often as a regular instructional strategy. There is no good reason for reserving them as "treats." Games are an engaging and effective way to package instruction and build students' interest in learning.

Asking and Answering Questions

It is important for teachers to be interesting as individuals, in addition to providing instruction that is interesting. Students are interested in who their teachers are, not just what they do. Thus a measure of self-revelation is professionally useful — and just as useful for students so that they get to know one another better

in order to enhance cooperation and teamwork. A key to being interesting is being interested in others.

One strategy I use involves asking and answering questions and, again, incorporates the sockball. In this exercise, one student takes a seat at the front of the room. (I usually occupy this chair first to set an example.) The student at the front will answer questions about his or her life from the other students in the room. The answerer tosses the sockball out and the catcher asks a question and throws the ball back to the answerer. The answerer responds and tosses out the ball to a different student, who then must frame a reasonable follow-up question. As the year progresses, students take turns being the answerer, until all students have had a chance to let their classmates know who they are and what they are interested in. Student questions can be kept in bounds by the teacher ruling out of order any question that is too personal.

This exercise, which qualifies as a kind of game, helps students develop both questioning and responding skills. I try to demonstrate that even the simplest question might be followed by a succession of ever-more complex and revealing questions. In fact, this strategy sometimes moves a student to comment, "Why don't you just ask the questions yourself, Mr. Russell?" But soon enough the students pick up the ball and become adept at asking good questions. And they are amazed at the information they can elicit from their classmates, who often are equally amazed at the depth of information that can be drawn from them.

The sockball exercise is good for bonding, for building community; but it also is effective in helping students think about what makes good questions and good answers.

42

Conclusion

People sometimes choose to endure uninteresting rigmarole because they are able to find meaning in things that accompany the rigmarole. For example, many educators endure dull conferences and meetings not because the information is important but because they will be able to network with other professionals at the conference, and that networking will provide important information.

Students also need to understand the importance of coping with boredom by finding interest in related, or collateral, activities. Previously, I mentioned the Charlton and Hertz (1989) study, in which nuclear weapons security guards devised illicit ways to stave off the boredom of guard duty. Sometimes teachers need to help students find acceptable ways to stave off the boredom of learning tedious but necessary information, such as foreign language vocabulary.

School is a social environment, and for students the social aspect often is more important than the learning aspect. Thus teachers should not confuse faithful attendance or participation with interest. Some of our stu-

dents enjoy our classes for reasons that we mistakenly attribute to our teaching. However, we can increase the likelihood that learning will occur and real interest in learning will be present by employing principles of active involvement and community building. Following are the building blocks that I have tried to sketch in this fastback:

- Understand the nature of boredom.
- Create interest by using new twists on old themes and by balancing freedom and structure.
- Hold students' attention by encouraging high levels of interaction and designing lessons for easy comprehension.
- Build rapport among students and between teachers and students by structuring situations that call for authenticity, communication, and cooperation.
- Understand the nature of fatigue.
- Design classroom games that create real learning in active, engaging ways that involve all students.

By attending to these interest-building principles, teachers can develop a learning environment in which boredom is minimized (not merely "banned") and students are encouraged to engage in focused, interested learning.

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